

Association of Human Rights Defenders and Promoters
International Human Rights Day Celebration

December 10, 2013

- Mingalaba kha-mya. Good morning. I am very pleased and honored to join this illustrious group of human rights defenders and activists in celebration of International Human Rights Day. I want to congratulate and thank the Human Rights Defenders and Promoters Group, led by U Myint Aye, who have so tirelessly and selflessly championed human rights in this country for many years, and U Soe Nyunt for organizing and hosting this event.
- It is also wonderful to be back this morning at the Royal Rose restaurant, the site of many important discussions and debates on how the people of this country can best contribute to democratization and protection of human rights.
- It is difficult to mark this day without noting the loss last week of one of the world's most important human rights defenders of our time, Nelson Mandela.
- Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison for demanding equal rights and basic human dignity for the majority black community in South Africa. He became a symbol of resolve, defiance and courage for his people, and despite pressures around him, never sacrificed his commitment to principle.
- And after his release, Mandela resisted the urge to exact revenge on his captors. Instead, he urged peace and reconciliation across the nation, realizing that only a South Africa that overcame historic ethnic and racial divides would be peaceful and secure.
- His leadership became not just a moral compass for his country but a beacon for all those who continue their own struggles for human rights, dignity and justice.
- It is not hard to draw connections between the life and work of Nelson Mandela and the work of many of you here in this country. Like Mandela, many of you have faced violence, hostility, and oppression, and been forced to spend the prime years of their lives in prison.
- And like Mandela after his release from prison in 1990, you now are faced with an important transitional moment in your country's history. You and your government will have to decide what kind of "new Myanmar" you want to create from the old, including the institutions, laws and principles upon which to base this new country.
- For instance, will you put an end to the existence of political prisoners and child soldiers, and ensure those who have suffered these indignities receive the assistance they need to regain their lives?

- Will the military maintain a privileged place in the system, or will it professionalize and assume its appropriate place in a democracy, under civilian control?
- Will the constitution be amended to ensure the rights of all ethnic peoples in this enormously diverse country are protected and respected?
- Will citizens have the right to freely choose their country's leadership?
- Will you enable your national Human Rights Commission to operate independently?
- Will you ensure that rumor, fear, and intolerance do not prevail over dialogue, understanding, and rule of law? Will all human beings present in this country, whatever faith, ethnic background, or citizenship status, be afforded the same basic protections and rights under law?
- Will you exclude *anyone* categorically from equal protection under the law, or from contributing to national development, such as the economically vulnerable, the disabled, and those otherwise marginalized, such as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community?
- Will you demand that sexual violence in all circumstances not only never be tolerated but be prosecuted under the law?
- And will you demand that women be afforded the same educational, societal, and employment opportunities as men?
- After all, one does not need to be a human rights defender to recognize that a country that discriminates against or leaves behind most of its population is holding back national development. Indeed, study after study has noted, for instance, that women's rights are not only human rights, but a core component of national strength.
- But while history has shown that nations that respect the rights of all their citizens are more stable, prosperous, and secure, history has also shown that the biggest danger to human rights, and national development, is fear.
- It is fear that has led some nations to be led astray, to believe that human rights can be applied selectively, perhaps to protect oneself from some perceived danger.
- However, it was another famous black human rights activist, Martin Luther King of the United States, who noted that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

- In other words, he recognized injustice as a disease: if injustice exists anywhere in the life of a country, it will not be contained but can, and likely will, spread.
- The surest cure, then, is to eradicate completely the mindset and practice of discrimination and injustice.
- It is not easy. The United States itself is still working to fulfill the great words of its founders to form a more perfect union, and safeguard justice and equal rights for all its citizens nearly 250 years after its birth.
- As President Obama has said, just because some truths are self-evident, it doesn't mean they are self-executing.
- But in the end, the purpose of International Human Rights Day is to remind us that we all must continually reflect on and rededicate ourselves to the cause of justice every single day -- as an international community, as individual nations, and as individual citizens.
- Only in that way will our countries, and our world, be truly secure.
- Again I am honored to be with you today to celebrate this occasion, and to affirm the commitment of the United States to stand with you in pursuit of human rights and justice in years to come as we have in years past.
- Thank you again for inviting me to join you at this wonderful ceremony.